Esotericism

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Esotericism signifies the holding of esoteric opinions or beliefs, that is, ideas preserved or understood by a small group of those specially initiated, or of rare or unusual interest. The term esoteric derives from the Greek ἐσωτερικός. Its antonym is *exoteric*.

Quotations pertaining to esotericism in philosophy

In Hindustan, as in England, there are doctrines for the learned, and dogmas for the unlearned; strong meat for men & milk for babes; facts for the few, & fictions for the many, realities for the wise, and romances for the simple; esoteric truth for the philosopher, & exoteric fable for the fool. ~ Hurrychund Chintamon

- ESOTERIC, adj. Very particularly abstruse and consummately occult. The ancient philosophies were of two kinds, -- *exoteric*, those that the philosophers themselves could partly understand, and *esoteric*, those that nobody could understand. It is the latter that have most profoundly affected modern thought and found greatest acceptance in our time.
  - Ambrose Bierce, *The Cynic's Dictionary* (1906); republished as *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911).
- In Hindustan, as in England, there are doctrines for the learned, and dogmas for the unlearned; strong meat for men & milk for babes; facts for the few, & fictions for the many, realities for the wise, and romances for the simple; esoteric truth for the philosopher, & exoteric fable for the fool.
  - Hurrychund Chintamon, quoted by H. P. Blavatsky, in New York (http://www.magister.msk.ru/library/blavatsk/states/e-78-02a.htm) (20 Jan. 1877)
- Should you be willing to read [Xenophon's *Anabasis*] very carefully you shall discover how … to deceive one's enemies to their harm and one's friends to their advantage, and to speak the truth in a way that will not pain those who are needlessly disturbed by it.
  - Dio Chrysostom, "On the Cultivation of Letters," *Discourses* (18.16–17), quoted and translated by Bartlett, *Xenophon: The Shorter Socratic Writings*, 4
- Erasmus dramatizes a well-established political position: that of the fool who claims license to criticize all and sundry without reprisal, since his madness defines him as not fully a person and therefore not a political being with political desires and ambitions. The *Praise of Folly*, therefore sketches the possibility of a position for the critic of the scene of political rivalry, a position not simply impartial between the rivals but also, by self-definition, off the stage of rivalry altogether.

- J. M. Coetzee, “Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*: Rivalry and Madness,” *Neophilologus* 76 (1992), p. 1

Probably there is no single doctrine of the Esoteric Tradition which makes so instant an appeal as does the idea of the present existence in the world of great sages or seers...such as Gautama the Buddha, Jesus the Syrian avatara, Apollonius of Tyana, Lao-Tse, Krishna, Sankaracharya, etc... ~ Gottfried de Purucker

- You can never tell the wise by what they say in public. They speak not in their own voices, but in that of common stupidity, though deep inside they are cursing it.
  - Baltasar Gracián, *Oráculo Manual y Arte de Prudencia*, § 43
- If there is something really demanding about philosophy, so that truth comes only to those who serve it by personal effort, discipline, and sacrifice, then a survey by an outsider cannot claim to offer anything like a true account.
  - Robert A. McDermott, “Esoteric philosophy,” *From Africa to Zen* (2003), p. 272
- Through the practice of esotericism, the great minds of the past endeavored to create the impression that they were supporters of the conventional political and religious views of their age. They used all their genius, in effect, to convince their (non-esoteric) readers that even their highest philosophical reflections always remained captive of the prevailing order. Thus, if one surveys the record of past philosophical writing without awareness of its esoteric character, one will necessarily and systematically misconstrue the relation of human thought to politics—or of reason to history, theory to practice—seeing every mind as merely the prisoner of its times. The result will be what in fact we see everywhere in the recent explosion of hermeneutical theory: the radical politicization or historicization of thought.
  - Arthur Melzer, “On the Pedagogical Motive for Esoteric Writing,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, Issue 4, November 2007, pp. 1015-1016
- It is the characteristic way of the wise to speak indirectly, to talk in figures, proverbs, and puzzles. All the sages of pre-modern cultures seem to share a belief in the ineffectiveness of open statements, the superficiality of direct communication. Wisdom, it seems, would not be so rare and difficult a thing if it could simply be “told” by one person to another.
  - Arthur Melzer, “On the Pedagogical Motive for Esoteric Writing,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 69, Issue 4, November 2007, p. 1017
- Machiavelli is the complete contrary of a machiavellian, since he describes the tricks of power and “gives the whole show away.” The seducer and the politician, who live in the dialectic and have a feeling and instinct for it, try their best to keep it hidden.
  - Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy* (Chicago: 1963), p. 59
- Attend me briefly while I now disclose

  How art of fable telling first arose.
  Unhappy slaves, in servitude confined,
  Dared not to their harsh masters show their mind,
  But under veiling of the fable’s dress
  Contrived their thoughts and feelings to express
  Escaping still their lord’s affronted wrath.
  So Aesop did; I widen out his path.
  - Phaedrus, *Fables*, quoted and translated in Vico, *The First New Science*, 136 (2.9.425)
- So behold me daring, not only to read the sacred messages of Moses, but also in my love of knowledge to peer into each of them and unfold and reveal what is not known to the multitude.
  - Philo, *On the Special Laws*, 3.6

- Be sure that you go to the author to get at his meaning, not to find yours. Judge it afterwards if you think yourself qualified to do so; but ascertain it first. And be sure, also, if the author is worth anything, that you will not get at his meaning all at once;—nay, that at his whole meaning you will not for a long time arrive in any wise. Not that he does not say what he means, and in strong words too; but he cannot say it all; and what is more strange, will not, but in a hidden way and in parables, in order that he may be sure you want it. I cannot quite see the reason of this, nor analyse that cruel reticence in the breasts of wise men which makes them always hide their deeper thought. They do not give it you by way of help, but of reward; and will make themselves sure that you deserve it before they allow you to reach it.
    - John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865)
- I am a Russian writer and therefore I have two slave's habits: first, to write allegorically and, second, to tremble. For the habit of allegorical writing I am indebted to the pre-reform Department of Censorship. It tormented Russian literature to such a degree, that it was as though it had vowed to wipe it off the face of the earth. But literature persisted in its desire to live and so pursued deceptive means.... On the one hand, allegories appeared; on the other, the art of comprehending these allegories, the art of reading between the lines. A special slave's manner of writing was created which can be called Aesopian, a manner which revealed a remarkable resourcefulness in the invention of reservations, innuendoes, allegories and other deceptive means.
    - M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, quoted by Ray J. Parrott, Jr., "Aesopian Language," in *Modern Encyclopedia*, 41
- Philosophizing means, then, to ascend from public dogma to essentially private knowledge.
    - Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (1953), p. 12
- Telling someone something he does not understand is pointless, even if you add that he will not be able to understand it. … If you have a room which you do not want certain people to get into, put a lock on it for which they do not have the key. But there is no point in talking to them about it, unless of course you want them to admire the room from outside! The honorable thing to do is to put a lock on the door which will be noticed only by those who can open it, not by the rest.
    - Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 7-8

Quotations pertaining to esotericism in religion

- Why did Christian teaching not bear any obvious information relating to esoteric knowledge, including reincarnation?... the Bible is full of esoteric wisdom. But it may take some insight to discover it. It seems to be the case, especially in the past, that esoteric information, when embodied in literature made available to the public, was veiled beneath exoteric or more obvious interpretations. For if the deep symbolic meanings in biblical literature had been made obvious, on the surface, it is questionable whether the Bible could have survived, especially through the dark ages. It probably would have been discarded as irrelevant. It seems to be an indication of genius on the part of many writers, whose works later were gathered together to make up the Bible, that they produced material which could be interpreted on at least three different levels. The first level is of course a quite literal one. The second is a bit more sophisticated but still subject to interpretation by the concrete mind of the orthodox religionist. The third carries an esoteric meaning.
    - Howard Ray Carey, *The Joy of Christ's Coming: From Traditional Religion To Ageless Wisdom*, Chapter 4. Hidden esotericism in the Bible, (1988)
- If we read the 13th chapter of Matthew with open eyes we find that Jesus' disciples were deeply puzzled as to why he spoke to the curious crowds in these word pictures, with such deeply hidden meanings. So they put the question to Jesus. He replied: This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. But He was planting the good seed deep in their lives to ponder upon, so that hopefully some time it would sprout, grow, and as He suggested bring forth grain, some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty.... But to His disciples Jesus said: Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. As you and I read the Bible let us ask ourselves: How acute is our esoteric vision and hearing? Geoffrey Hodson, a theosophical writer, in his book *The Hidden Wisdom in the*

Holy Bible, Vol. I, gives us excellent clues to the symbolic meanings of the Bible. One of his suggestions is that we look at many biblical passages not for historical information, but that we consider them as happenings within our lives...

  - Howard Ray Carey, *The Joy of Christ's Coming: From Traditional Religion To Ageless Wisdom*, Chapter 4. Hidden esotericism in the Bible, (1988)

- The Tibetan Book of the Dead is ostensibly a book describing the experiences to be expected at the moment of death, during an intermediate phase lasting forty-nine (seven times seven) days, and during rebirth into another bodily frame. This however is merely the exoteric framework which the Tibetan Buddhists used to cloak their mystical teachings. … The esoteric meaning, as it has been interpreted in this manual, is that it is death and rebirth of the ego that is described, not of the body. Lama Govinda indicates this clearly in his introduction when he writes: “It is a book for the living as well as the dying.” The book's esoteric meaning is often concealed beneath many layers of symbolism. It was not intended for general reading. It was designed to be understood only by one who was to be initiated personally by a guru into the Buddhist mystical doctrines, into the pre-mortem-death-rebirth experience. These doctrines have been kept a closely guarded secret for many centuries, for fear that naive or careless application would do harm.
  - Timothy Leary, *The Psychedelic Experience* (1964), p. 12
- To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand."
  - Mark 4:10-12
- And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food.
  - Paul of Tarsus, 1 Corinthians 3:1-2
- The Gospel-story is merely an idealized fiction, written by Christian mystics in imitation of esoteric mysteries of the Pagans, showing the initiation-trials and tests of the candidates for initiation; and it is not very well done, there being much error and many mistakes in the Gospels. Ch. 1
  - Gottfried de Purucker in *The Story of Jesus* (https://www.theosophy.world/resource/story-jesus-g-de-purucker) (1938)
- One who is clever conceals knowledge, but the mind of a fool broadcasts folly.
  - Solomon, Proverbs 12:23

Quotations pertaining to esotericism as the philosophy and science of human evolution

- The basic approach for all who endeavour to grasp esotericism, or to teach esoteric students, is to lay the emphasis upon the world of energies and to recognise that behind all happenings in the world of phenomena... exists the world of energies; these are of the greatest diversity and complexity, but all of them move and work under the Law of Cause and Effect...
  - Alice Bailey in *Education in The New Age, (Lucis Trust)* (https://www.lucistrust.org/books/ponder_on_this/ponder_online/contents/part_2/books_ponder_on_this_ponder_online_contents_part_2_050_053#52) (1954)
- Both [esoteric and occult] mean hidden... for a given time, not for all time — but hidden because, at this point in the evolution of the race, it is largely unknown and unacceptable to all but a relatively small number... To humanity in general it is unknown, therefore esoteric or occult. The word `occult' has been given, by various religious groups, a rather bad connotation; it is seen as something dark, evil, to do with nefarious practices, devil worship, and so on. This is a complete misunderstanding of the word occult. Occult simply means hidden, and specifically the hidden knowledge or science of the energies behind the evolutionary process.

Esotericism might be seen more as the philosophy of the evolutionary process, and occultism as the science of the energies which bring that process about.

  - Benjamin Creme, *The Ageless Wisdom, An Introduction to Humanity's Spiritual Legacy, Share International Foundation* (https://share-international.org/books_AWT.html) (1996)

- Esotericism — The philosophy of the evolutionary process both in man and the lower kingdoms in nature. The science of the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Presents a systematic and comprehensive account of the energetic structure of the universe and of man's place within it. Describes the forces and influences that lie behind the phenomenal world. Also, the process of becoming aware of and gradually mastering these forces.

  - Benjamin Creme, Glossary of esoteric terms, *The Ageless Wisdom Teachings,* (1996)

Both [esoteric and occult] mean hidden... because, at this point in the evolution of the race, it is largely unknown and unacceptable to all but a relatively small number... Occult simply means... specifically the hidden knowledge or science of the energies behind the evolutionary process. Esotericism might be seen more as the philosophy of the evolutionary process, and occultism as the science of the energies which bring that process about. ~ Benjamin Creme

- The Ageless Wisdom Teachings, or esotericism as it is often called, is not a religion. It is not, strictly speaking, a philosophy; it is not an art or a science, but it has something of all of these. You might say that esotericism is the philosophy, or the science, of the evolutionary process, as it pertains to the human and the subhuman kingdoms. But it is about the evolution of consciousness, not of the physical form. If you want to know about the evolution of the physical form, turn to Darwin - he has pretty well summed up the nature of evolution as regards the form of the animal and the human kingdoms. But in terms of the evolution of consciousness, you have to turn to the esoteric -- esoteric only so far; for that which is esoteric gradually becomes exoteric. Nothing which humanity can safely use is ever withheld, so it is up to us how much of this teaching is given at any time.*

  - Benjamin Creme in *The Ageless Wisdom, An Introduction to Humanity's Spiritual Legacy,* (https://share-international.org/books_AWT.html) (1996)

- In every age, or in times of exceptional crisis, great spiritual teachers have come into the world to enable mankind to take its next evolutionary step. We know them, among others, as Hercules, Rama, Sankaracharya, Krishna, Buddha, Mohammed and the Christ. Each has given a body of teaching, a central and common theme of which is `right human relations'... This common well-spring of wisdom is an ancient body of spiritual teaching handed down from generation to generation, and known as the `Ageless Wisdom'. As an esoteric science — meaning simply that it lies beyond the understanding or comprehension of the average person — it presents a systematic and comprehensive account of the evolutionary process, in man and nature, from an energetic standpoint: how the universe came to exist, how it operates, and man's place within it. Esotericism, as it is sometimes called, is also the art of working with those energies which emanate from the highest spiritual sources. From behind the scenes, these teachings have guided and shaped civilization after civilization, leading to all the great advances in human endeavor, be they in the sciences, politics, the arts or religion.

  - Benjamin Creme in *The Ageless Wisdom, An Introduction to Humanity's Spiritual Legacy,* (https://share-international.org/books_AWT.html) (1996)

- In its essence, esotericism is the art of consciously recognizing that all existence, manifested in its myriad variations of form and quality, is fundamentally based on energy. Not only are all forms of creation composed of energy, but every form of activity also arises from streams of energy activated by that all-encompassing law of nature the Law of Cause and Effect. The function of the esotericist is to take cognisance of these energies and, as far as his mental and spiritual evolution allows, to learn how these energies may best be guided and controlled to the maximum advantage of humanity...

  - Aart Juriaanse quoted in *The nature of esotericism,* (https://www.share-international.org/archives/AgelessWisdom/aw_ajesotericism.htm), Excerpted from the book *Bridges* by Aart Jurriaanse, ISBN 3-929345-11-0, (2001)

- Probably there is no single doctrine of the Esoteric Tradition which makes so instant an appeal as does the idea of the present existence in the world of great sages or seers. In most minds there lies an intuition that there must be in the world human beings of far loftier spiritual capacity and of immensely more developed intellectual power than the ordinary run of men. Those who hear of this for the first time instantly turn to those luminous figures, such as Gautama the Buddha, Jesus the Syrian avatara, Apollonius of Tyana, Lao-Tse, Krishna, Sankaracharya, etc. and, among many, the first reaction is: if such great figures have already existed in the world, why should they not exist again? Ch. 19
  - Gottfried de Purucker in *The Esoteric Tradition* (https://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/et/et-hp.htm) (1935)
- The Brotherhood of great seers and sages, united in a common purpose and governed by common ideals and esoteric knowledge, has existed as an association of high adepts under the direct inspiration and guidance of their hierarch, or mahaguru, for many millions of years — certainly for not less than twelve million; in other words, since the appearance on earth of the root-race which preceded our own present fifth root-race...The cause of the disappearance of the Mysteries has always been degeneracy, faithlessness on the part of the students, and their lack of an imperative and heart-reaching call for light. Where there is a genuine spiritual and intellectual call issuing from both heart and mind, there invariably comes the response by way of a new installment of teaching from the Brotherhood. Ch.22
  - Gottfried de Purucker in *The Esoteric Tradition* (1935)

See also

- Age of Aquarius
- The Ageless Wisdom Teachings
- *The Reappearance of the Christ*, by Alice A Bailey
- Helena Petrovna Blavatsky
- *The Reappearance of the Christ and the Masters of Wisdom*, by Benjamin Creme
- Maitreya (Theosophy)
- The Masters and the Path (book by C.W. Leadbeater)
- Masters of Wisdom
- Philosophy
- Occultism
- Helena Roerich
- Theosophical Society

External links

- Online appendix for *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (http://www.press.uchicago.edu/sites/melzer/)

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